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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 1370  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 1291  
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SUBJECT: TAJIK TRANSPORT MINISTER PLEASSED WITH BRIDGE

¶1. On his first visit to the U.S.-funded bridge construction site at Nizhniy Pyanzh, Transportation Minister Ashurov expressed great satisfaction and offered to get involved personally if problems arise regarding the cement supply or customs. During the February 13 visit with PolOff and a visiting Trade And Development Agency transportation mission, Ashurov reported that President Rahmonov asked him about the project two days earlier, and was waiting for a full briefing after Ashurov's trip.

¶2. Ashurov had requested the visit during a January 27 meeting with PolOff, noting he had not been to the site since the June 2005 groundbreaking ceremony. He expressed mild dissatisfaction that even he, the Minister of Transportation, needed special permission to get access to the site. The Project Engineer told Ashurov that he and technical specialists from the Ministry would be welcome at any time, provided they make arrangements through the Embassy, assuaging Ashurov's concern.

¶3. Progress at the bridge was visible. The Project Engineer noted that Tajik customs had held up some equipment for a period, and a change in the management of the state cement factory threatened to delay work. Ashurov observed that there had been a trilateral agreement between the U.S., Afghan, and Tajik governments, and the contractor, and he would get personally involved with any further customs disputes to ensure the project stayed on track. The Deputy Head of Khatlon province asked some pointed questions about safety conditions and wages for Tajik workers.

¶4. The seven-hour round trip car ride provided ample opportunity to discuss other transportation priorities. Ashurov noted road rehabilitation for major transit corridors had attracted significant foreign attention, and many projects were in various stages of planning and financing. The Japanese are rehabilitating 23 km of road from the bridge to Dusti, which then links to the main highway to Dushanbe. A Chinese feasibility study of rebuilding the Sharshar pass by Nurek should lead to a grant for that project. The Asian Development Bank has taken the lead on other significant road projects, including the strategically and commercially vital road from

Dushanbe, through the Rasht Valley, to the Kyrgyz border.

¶5. Although Tajik roads take a beating from flooding, rains, and avalanches, the minister admitted there was not much planning for minor maintenance and repairs; local governments held that responsibility, but did not always allocate resources for roads. However, budgets for maintenance have increased on the local and national level - last year the central government spent 40 million somoni (approx. \$13 million) on road maintenance and repair.

¶6. Ashurov made a plug for developing a tram/streetcar system in Dushanbe to connect the city center to the fast-growing residential regions on the outskirts. He suggested getting used streetcars from Europe or America to build the system. Ashurov is a career employee of the Transportation Ministry - he referred to himself as an "automobilist" several times - and took a great technical interest in the bridge and other possible projects.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: Ashurov, a career employee of the Ministry of Transport, got into the weeds on the technical aspects of the bridge and seemed pleased with what he saw and heard. His personal interest may well smooth the way and help keep this strategic project on track. He enjoys a reputation as an honest cabinet member, respected by the President, if not in the inner circle, and should prove to be a key partner in the Central Asian Infrastructure Integration Initiative. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND